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ABSTRACT

Noting that research indicating Newbery Medal books are not popular with elementary students in spite of their unquestioned superiority in plot, characterization, and style, a study examined the readability level of Newbery Medal winners from 1974 to 1986. Three readability formulas were used to assess readability: Gunning's Fog Index, Fry Readability formula, and the Flesch Grade Level formula. Results of analysis indicated that of the 13 books examined, the average grade level for only 3 books fell below the sixth grade reading ability level. Four of the 13 books averaged within the sixth grade reading ability level, and 4 required a reading ability level of eighth grade or above. It is important to recognize, however, that although readability formulas can provide objective, quantitative estimates of a book's difficulty, librarians, teachers, and parents must bring important subjective factors into consideration when making their own judgments of difficulty. (Readability levels of each of the books for all three formulas are included.) (HTH)

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The Readability of the Newbery Medal Books (1974-1986)

Paul J. Schafer

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The Readability of the Newbery Medal Books (1974-1986)

Each year, librarians, teachers, parents, and booksellers await the announcement of the winner of the Newbery Medal. The name of the winner is, inevitably, greeted with keen disappointment by some and with great rejoicing by others. Although it would be a dull world if we were all to agree, it is disconcerting to hear criticism that children do not read the Newbery Medal winners.

In 1922, the Newbery Medal was born at Swampscott, Massachusetts, at a meeting of the American Library Association. Frederick Melcher suggested that a medal be given annually for the most distinguished book published for children during the preceding year. Since the medal was intended to stimulate American writers, it was established for an original work by a citizen or resident of the United States. The words "most distinguished" were wisely left undefined and unqualified so that no limitations are placed upon the character of the book. The medal was named for John Newbery, the 18th century bookseller, who pioneered in publishing books for children's enjoyment, not just for their moral edification.

It has been said for many years that the Newbery books are highly praised by producers, publishers, and fellow authors; criticized by librarians, educators, and laymen; overlooked, ignored, and neglected by children. Indeed the complaints about the Newbery Medal books insist that the books are: "too old," "too feminine," "too often have foreign backgrounds," "too

mature," and "too literary." The complaint most often heard, however, is that the books are too difficult for the children to read and, therefore, are not popular with children. In spite of the importance that these books achieve because of their selection and regardless of their unquestioned superiority in plot, characterization and style, many studies indicate that the Newbery books are not popular with elementary students.

A study done by the author in 1976 indicated that only nine of the Newbery Medal winners from 1940 to 1973 had a readability of sixth grade or lower.

The present study examines the Newbery medal winners from 1974 to 1986. Assuming the validity of the readability formulas, the results of this study are useful to teachers, librarians, and parents as they select and recommend suitable books for children.

Three readability formulas were used to assess readability: Gunning's Fog Index, Fry Readability and the Flesch Grade Level.

All three formulas call for three 100 word random samples from the beginning, middle and end of each Newbery Medal winner. The Fog Index, developed by Robert Gunning, is based on two factors: the average sentence length and a hard word factor. The Fry Formula considers sentence length and the total number of syllables. The Flesch Grade level is based on the frequency of abstract words and number of affixes as well as sentence length (in words).

The results (rounded to the nearest grade level) are shown below:

Award Year	Title	FOG Index	Fry Index	Flesch Grade	Average
1974	The Slave Dancer	9.5	8.0	6.0	7.8
1975	M.C. Higgins the Great	5.1	4.0	5.0	4.7
1976	The Grey King	8.5	7.8	6.0	7.4
1977	Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry	11.5	9.0	7.8	9.4
1978	Bridge to Terabithia	5.4	5.6	5.0	5.3
1978	The Westing Game	8.5	9.0	7.8	8.4
1980	A Gathering of Days	9.0	8.9	7.8	8.6
1981	Jacob Have I Loved	7.4	7.0	6.0	6.8
1982	A Visit to William Blake's Inn	6.1	6.7	6.0	6.3
1983	Dicey's Song	6.9	7.0	6.0	6.6
1984	Dear Mr. Henshaw	7.0	6.7	5.0	6.2
1985	The Hero and The Crown	13.2	10.0	9.1	10.8
1986	Sarah, Plain and Tall	4.0	3.0	5.0	4.0

As can be seen from the chart, only three books are below the sixth grade reading:

M.C. Higgins the Great (4.7)

Bridge to Terabithia (5.3)

Sarah, Plain and Tall (4.0)

Four of the thirteen books analyzed fall within the sixth grade reading level:

Dear Mr. Henshaw (6.2)

A Visit to William Blake's Inn (6.3)

Dicey's Song ((6.6)

Jacob Have I Loved (6.8)

It is interesting to note that the average readability of four of the thirteen Newbery Award winners require a reading level of eighth grade or above:

The Westing Game (8.4)

A Gathering of Days (8.6)

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (9.4)

The Hero and the Crown (10.8)

It is important to recognize that although readability formulas can provide objective, quantitative estimates of a book's difficulty, librarian, teachers, and parents, in making their own judgments of difficulty, must bring important subjective factors into consideration that are not considered by formulas. An awareness of the conceptual difficulty of the material, the way the material is organized, and more importantly, the motivation and interests of children, are all vital factors which cannot be quantified. In short, judgments concerning the readability of a book should be based on sound knowledge of stylistic elements of difficulty, tempered with a

common sense understanding of the interests and abilities of young readers.

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